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# Domestic/Terror

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# DOMESTIC/TERROR

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts

in  
The Department of Art

by  
Charles Russell Durio  
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## **Acknowledgements**

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## **Abstract**

The focus of my studio work is an exploration of my interest in the physical and mental dynamics that take place within the confines of my home versus the world outside. The home, spatial arrangements (architecture, passageways), maritime disasters, and the ambiguity of abstract expressionism all have an identifiable impact on my images. Abstraction allows me to maintain a visual ambiguity that often reflects the ambiguity of the real-life situations on which they are based. My drawings are rooted in remembrances of events and interior architecture culled from childhood memories. It also explores the juxtaposition of domesticity and fear, both imagined and real, past and present. I'm currently in control of both. Currently.

## Part I: Domestic

do·mes·tic [də-mes-tik]

**adjective**

1. Of the home, household, or family affairs.
2. Fond of home and family life.
3. Not wild; tame; living with man or under the care of man.

*The World Book Dictionary, Volume One.*

The concept of the home conjures a myriad of terms that are associated with domesticity: security, happiness, bonding, love, nurturing, the nest, safety; clichés like “home is where the heart is” or “home sweet home” abound. These are idealized concepts attached to the idea of what “home” is—or should be—in an attempt to buffer the occupants of the home from the vulgarities of the world outside. Terms attached to the outside world are the opposite of those associated with life within it: dangerous, wild, mad, unknown, perilous, evil.

I suppose that examining the relationship between inside and outside has always been intriguing to me. To a very large extent, my childhood memories are connected with fear. I was in constant fear of my parents, always on edge, petrified at the idea that I might set one of them off by doing something they deemed wrong. I was reprimanded or grounded so often that whatever room I was banished to became a box of solace rather than my punishment. My imagination became the vehicle from which I saw the world, but the view was always from inside the box. The architecture of a room—four walls, a ceiling, and a floor—framed my fantasies.

Throughout my childhood, I became increasingly more aware of the structure and the physicality of the house (as something other than a home). I would check the doors and windows every night, an action manifested by a fear of home invasion and other terrible scenarios I would concoct in my head. More likely than not, this compulsion was rooted in my parents’ own neurotic fears, which eventually led them to permanently screwing shut every window in the house. They had me convinced that, beyond the circle of a few close personal friends (and even fewer relatives), the outside world was pure evil and trying to get me.

I created increasingly worse scenarios and fantasies of fear taking place outside of the home in order to make sense of my fear that was rooted within the home. I did this because “home” is supposed to be safe, yet my perception of my home was not of the security that it was supposed to provide. It was scary and disconcerting. My rationale was that if the interior, home world was something to fear, then the outside world must be much more horrific. Not to mention I grew up at the height of the Cold War. Nuclear holocaust was lurking just around the corner.

So not only was I in fear inside my home, but outside as well. Even at a young age, I knew something was wrong. I was only happy in my imagination. This is the source of the juxtaposition of familiar domesticity and the unknown in my work. Sometimes the work takes on a sinister, ominous tone when I confront the unknown; sometimes the work is lighthearted and fun, playful/scary.

An epiphany occurred to me when I discovered the work of James Rosenquist during my first semester at college, during an art appreciation class. Until then, I had really never been exposed to art. His juxtaposition of seemingly unrelated objects in a concise, ordered manner (or composition) struck a chord in me. Here was someone using a visual medium to make order from things that don't necessarily belong together. In his 1981 work *House of Fire*, Rosenquist combined lipstick, a bag of groceries, an open window, and a bucket of molten steel. He made seemingly unrelated, rather mundane objects work together.



Figure 1. *House of Fire*, James Rosenquist, 1981.

Later, when I learned about the Abstract Expressionists, I realized that the juxtaposition need not rely on the depiction of recognizable objects, but simply in the relationship between forms and color. The works of Arshille Gorky, Robert Motherwell, and Franz Kline seemed to me both a step forward and backward at the same time. A step forward because these artists eschewed the familiar recognizable object in favor of the essence of the form, but backward because they removed an association with the familiar. Their removal of the familiar form resulted in ambiguity, which in turn alluded to the unknown, a theme in which I was well versed.

In Gorky, I saw scenes and interactions between forms that made sense to me. His colors became characters, each acting out parts of a dramatic scene.



Figure 2. *Water of the Flowery Mill*, Arshille Gorky, 1944.

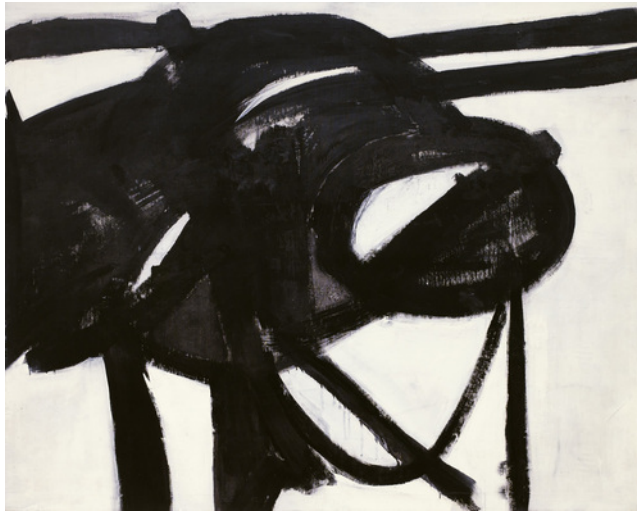


Figure 3. *Cheif*, Franz Kline, 1950.

In Kline's work, I saw structures that made sense even though I had not yet been taught about formal compositions. It reminded me of looking at my own familiar interior solace/space. After a while, the straight lines begin to warp and bend. Shadows cast by outside and artificial light change the perceived barriers and dimensions in rooms.

In Motherwell's paintings, I saw elements of both Gorky and Kline, but simplified. I could not only see Gorky's rounded organic forms, but also Kline's hard-edged lines which, in my mind, created a kind of architecture.





Figure 4. *Elegy to the Spanish Republic*, Robert Motherwell, 1950.

When I began to create my own work, my earliest influences turned out to also be the strongest. The home, domesticity, spatial arrangements, and the ambiguity of abstract expressionism all had an identifiable impact on my images.

As my works progressed, I found that the importance I had initially placed on my ideas concerning domesticity was still finding its way into my later works. I realized that the very deep impressions which were tied to these intense memories were so memorable *because they occurred within the context of domesticity*.

## Part II: Terror

ter·ror [**ter**- ər]

**noun**

1. Great fear.
2. Cause of great fear.

*The World Book Dictionary, Volume Two.*

Quite frankly, the victim did not have a chance. The severity of the injury resulted in a very quick death.

*Marine Biologist George H. Burgess  
Director of the International Shark Attack File  
University of Florida*

I grew up in Florida, very near to the ocean and have always had a fascination with the sea. In high school, I had a friend whose parents were wealthy and able to afford a home directly on the water. Their backyard ended abruptly at a seawall, with no fence or obstruction to the sea. When I first visited Troy's house, the idea that the comfort and security of the home was no more than 15 or 20 yards from the perils of the untamed, inhospitable wilds of nature (the open ocean) left a strong and deep impression on me.

A few years before my visit to Troy's house, I had gone surfing with my brother and a friend after school. I was wading in about 15 feet of water, arms stretched out over the surfboard, with my body in the water from the shoulders down. While we waited for the next good wave, we were each consecutively "bumped" by a large shark. As it swam between my legs, I was so scared that I immediately froze. It wasn't until my brother and friend started screaming that I snapped out of my fear-induced paralysis and made it very, very quickly back to shore. Even though we came out of the ordeal unscathed, to this day I will not go into ocean water past my waist.

After that encounter, I became fascinated with shark attacks. A few years ago I discovered the International Shark Attack File, an agency that keeps detailed records of nearly every known shark attack, domestic and abroad, from the past 150 years. I read about the case of a 67 year old man named Thadeus Kubinski, who was killed by a 10 foot tiger shark just 15 minutes from where I had grown up in Florida. He, like my high school friend, lived right on the water. Every day, Mr. Kubinski would walk out of his back door, cross his back yard, and jump into Boca Ciega Bay for a swim. On this particular day, the splash of his dive attracted a shark that had been feeding in the area. Within seconds of Mr. Kubinski entering the water, as his

wife watched from the edge of the seawall, the shark attacked, biting him across the torso. The part of the account of the attack that really struck me was that, as the shark was thrashing on the surface with Mr. Kubinski's body in his jaws, Mr. Kubinski locked eyes with his wife who was forced to witness her husband being eaten alive.

The idea of a shark attack finds its way into many of my works, most recently in *Aurora III*. The title takes its name from a series of studies I did using Guido Reni's 1614 fresco *Aurora* as inspiration. Reni's fresco depicts the goddess Aurora pulling back the night sky to make way for the sun god Apollo's chariot ride across the daytime sky. In my depiction, the legs of the horses that pull Apollo's chariot have become the legs of the attack victim, kicking furiously and bubbling the surface of the water. The reds and oranges signifying the lights of dawn are now blood in the water.



Figure 5. *Aurora III*, 2013.

Just as Kline and Motherwell used abstract forms to create a sense of architecture, I use similar forms to create architectural passages. The idea of the “passageway” comes in many forms. Often, it takes form in my work as simply as an actual doorway, or in some cases a window. It can also be a ladder or a staircase. The door started as a facet of the home and the physicality of its components, but it evolved into a symbol of the transition from one place to another, and in some instances, from boredom to fun, from life to death. The inclusion of the ladder also serves as another representation of a passageway because it is a device that allows for transportation from one place to another. It is also the way from floor to floor, room to room, solid ground to the water, as in the ladder attached to a seawall, to a boat, or even into a swimming pool.

In two of my most recent works, *USS Arizona* and *USS Indianapolis*, I still find myself dealing with and exploring transitions from place to place through the use of nautical themes. My father was born two years and two days after the attack on Pearl Harbor. He was named Russell after his uncle, my great uncle, who died on the USS Arizona in 1941. The story of the sinking of the Arizona is familiar to nearly all

Americans, and had a significant impact on me since my great uncle is also my namesake.



Figure 6. *USS Arizona Memorial*, Pearl Harbor, Honolulu, Hawaii, Alfred Preis, 1962.

My wife's great uncle died on the USS Indianapolis in 1945. The story of the Indianapolis was made familiar to me from the 1975 Steven Spielberg movie "Jaws" In one scene, the archetypal Captain Ahab character, Quint, reveals that he was a survivor of the Indianapolis. The ship's mission had been so secret (they were carrying "THE bomb") that when they were torpedoed and sunk by a Japanese submarine their whereabouts were unknown for four days. About 900 sailors went into the sea, and over the course of those four days, sharks systematically devoured 600 or so of those 900 sailors until the few survivors were rescued. Along with the sinking of the Arizona, these are two of the country's worst maritime disasters.

In my works that confront these disasters, a change has taken place: no longer am I sorting through memories of when I was a subject in my parents' home. Now I'm in control of my new domestic space: *my* home. The spaces have changed as far as decor, but the familiar architecture of the box remains: four walls, a ceiling, and a floor. But the way I go about confronting terrors, in this instance two famous maritime disasters, is disturbingly *comforting*. Now that I am in control of what happens to myself in the context of *my* home, terror is subject to *my* rule. No longer am I the timid child in fear of his parents. I'm in control of this space, and the only fears I'm subject to are the ones I allow.

This is perhaps the phenomenon Peter Benchley refers to in his book *Shark Trouble*. In discussing the craze about the fabled 2001 outbreak of shark attacks around the United States which have now been famously referred to as the "Summer of the Shark", Benchley writes "For some of us, the fear is a *safe* fear, what *The New York Times*, in an editorial, called 'pleasurable cultural hysteria.' It is a fear of something that is unlikely ever to happen to us." It is also interesting to note that the

“Summer of the Shark” ended on September 11, 2001, when the shark was replaced by a different form of terror.



Figure 7. *USS Arizona*, 2013.

While executing the work *USS Arizona*, I found myself not as much trying to imagine the explosions, fires or the fear of the sailors involved in the surprise attack, but more how I relate to the history of the event. My wife and I have discussed that if we ever have a baby boy, he might be named after his two great-great uncles who died in these disasters. In this work, I imagined the Arizona Memorial in Pearl Harbor. Implied are the blue water, ghostly hints at submerged naval architecture, the memorial structure itself, and at the top of the work, the thin layer of oil, and the rainbow of color that continues to leak from the ship to this day. And, of course, the ubiquitous door, which in this instance stands as a metaphor not only for life to death, but also from past to present.





Figure 8. *USS Indianapolis*, 2013.

In *USS Indianapolis* I envisioned multiple horizons, possibly through a periscope: the horizon of the ocean, and the horizons of the multiple depths within which the Japanese submarine operated to target its kill. Once again, the blue represents the water, while the yellow of the submarine in the upper right corner is a representation of the cowardice of an attack conducted under concealment. The depiction of a hull at the bottom of the work is colored a rusty red, in direct reference to the atrophy from lying at the bottom of the sea floor. The red beneath the hull is the blood of the sailors, including that of my wife's great uncle. The diagonal red lines follow the path of the torpedo.

I am conscious of using a softer color palette for these works, because I also imagined them hung in the baby's room, not only to serve as decoration on the walls, but as a reminder of the child's lineage and the weight of that posterity. To me, a detached feeling of patriotic melancholy surrounds both pieces. To quote Stephane Mallarme's famous dictum: "To paint, not the thing, but the effect it produces." Both *USS Arizona* and *USS Indianapolis* are my attempts to do just that: create works that convey the way I feel about both disasters and the emotional impact that they had on me.

During the summer of 2012, I discovered the work of Albert Oehlen. I was instantly overwhelmed with its freshness and its similarity to my own work. While researching Oehlen, I came across an article entitled "Provisional Painting" by Raphael Rubinstein in the May 2009 issue of *Art in America*. In the article, Rubinstein mentions Albert Oehlen and Christopher Wool (among others) as "artists who have long made works that look casual, dashed-off, tentative, unfinished or self-cancelling. In different ways, they all deliberately turn away from 'strong' painting for something that seems to constantly risk inconsequence or collapse."



Figure 9. *Rasieren*, Albert Oehlen, 2005.

Rubinstein goes on to mention that this “risk” could be linked with the idea of the “impossibility of painting”. He says:

What makes painting “impossible”? What makes “great” painting impossible? Perhaps it is a sense of belatedness, a conviction that an earlier generation or artist has left only a few scraps to be cleaned up. Or maybe, at a particular moment, in a particular life and history, nothing could seem more presumptuous or inappropriate—maybe even obscene—than to set out to create a masterpiece. Impossibility can also be the result of the artist making excessive demands on the work, demands to which current practice has no reply. At a certain moment, in a certain studio, it appears that great painting may be impossible, that painting of any kind may be impossible. Nonetheless, for whatever reasons pertaining to a particular painter at a particular time, painting must be done, must go on.

Rubinstein’s musings echo a sentiment art critic Clement Greenberg suggested seventy years earlier when he wrote that the most important function of contemporary art “was not to ‘experiment’, but to find a path along which it would be possible to keep culture *moving* in the midst of ideological confusion and violence”.

This so-called “impossibility” reminded me of the mildest of paralyses I sometimes encounter when making my own works. I *know* the feeling of making work that borders on something that seems constantly to risk in consequence or collapse. Perhaps this is what I perceive as a commonality between my work and Oehlen’s. Perhaps this is my new “fear.” As if the confrontation with my old demons has resulted in me as victor, only to be replaced by another obstruction to keep the duality of domestication and terror alive in my work, albeit a milder form of terror.



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## **Vita**

Charles Russell Durio was born in Baton Rouge, Louisiana in the summer of 1970. Neither of his parents have a college degree. He spent eighteen years of his life in Florida. He finished his B.F.A. twenty years after he started it. Charles entered Louisiana State University's Master of Fine Arts program in 2011, and intends to graduate in December of 2013.